

How Valid are Newspaper Representations of Caste?

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Abstract

The long-standing view of Indian society as a caste-based hierarchy has been rejected by the Indian Constitution but continues to find currency in the news content. This view manifests itself in the form of terms such as 'upper caste' and 'lower caste'. This article considers these terms and their usage problematic. Using deductive logic, it offers a test for determining inherence of the idea of hierarchy in a given news story. Further, it checks this test with a sample of recent news stories from two leading English-language dailies and finds that, along with the occurrence of problematic usage, there is acknowledgement of the contested nature of the said terms and that news sources are emerging as a major source of such usage.

Keywords: Caste, social hierarchy, deductive logic, representation, journalism

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INTRODUCTION

The 2015 edition of the World Bank's annual publication, the World Development Report, titled 'Mind, Society, and Behaviour', is especially valuable for bringing into focus the psychological and social influences on people's behaviour. In one telling case (World Development Report, 2015: 12), it cites a study on the effects of stereotypes, where it was found that boys from a disadvantaged group were as good as everyone else at solving puzzles when their caste was not revealed, but their performance fell by 23 per cent in tests after their caste identity was revealed. Its larger point is that what is true in an experimental situation is also true of the wider society. Given the news media's power to shape worldviews, its representations can have long-term cognitive effects on society.

In this context, the moot question is why should Indian newspapers persist with the degrading description of a section of society as “lower caste” and certain others as “upper caste”? As social institutions dealing with the printed word, newspapers can be expected to have a valid basis for every bit of information they publish and every representation of reality they create. The principles of journalism also state as much, saying the profession’s first obligation is to the truth and its essence is the discipline of verification (Pew Research Center, 2015). By and large, newspapers uphold these principles and, through it, gain some of their credibility, but not always. All major newspapers in India use the terms “lower caste” and “upper caste” to qualify the social identity of particular groups. A simple Google search would provide evidence of this practice. Try, for instance, <“upper caste” thehindu.com>, or <“upper caste” timesofindia.com> on Google.

Do the newspapers have a basis for this usage? The roots of most conceptions of hierarchical society in India go back to ancient Hindu tradition, particularly to the 2000-year-old ‘law book’ called *ManuSmriti* (Jodhka, 2012: 2). Even with regard to that text, doubts have been expressed as to whether it should be read as a proposed, ideal system, or as an actual one in practice at the time of its writing (Thapar, 2010: 3). Even if there were no such doubts, there has been a consensus at least since India became a republic in 1950 that the egalitarian principles enshrined in the Constitution of India would override any tradition of social hierarchy that may have existed, and offer every individual the liberty to follow or not to follow a given tradition.

If newspapers continue to use terms such as “upper caste” and “lower caste”, it should be either an adoption of the above tradition as a convention, or a choice made consciously in each case of usage. India’s leading English newspapers, such as *The Hindu* and *The Times of India*, which often take nuanced editorial stances on social issues, cannot be considered to be unconscious adopters in this respect. Also, the same ancient tradition accords a lower status to women too, just as it does to certain social groups (Thapar, 2010: 28-29). But newspapers, creditably, disregard the tradition in favour of a modern value of equal status of men and women. So, if the terms

“upper caste” and “lower caste” continue to occur, it must be the case that the newspapers have a reason or two for using them.

If the reason is indeed a belief in the hierarchical system, then there is little to be investigated because it would quite simply be a case of a free exercise of choice from among the options before them, just as it would be for any individual citizen. If not, could it be that the social reality that the newspapers provide representations of, can only be understood in the said hierarchical terms, thereby possibly forcing newspapers to go against their own convictions?

SOCIAL HEIRARCHY AND INDIAN PRESS - ANALYSIS

The idea of social hierarchy can be considered to be either inherent in the issue being reported or it is not. How does one determine this? Can the text of published stories provide a test of the necessity of such usage? Broadly, for the purpose of answering the above question, a journalist's work can be divided into two parts: the first, dealing with gathering of information from various sources; and the second, involving construction of a news report, a feature or an article with the information so gathered. Since the information gathered from sources will retain its sanctity only when it is left untouched and unmodified, one can assume that journalists do not alter information gathered from sources. They are of course at considerable liberty to decide what information to include and what to leave out of the story, but that aspect would properly belong to the second, i.e., the construction, part of their work. With these assumptions, it can be said that the notion of hierarchy is inherent in a given story and limits the liability of journalists if it is part of the information gathered from sources. If not, it would be a part of the journalist's construction and the usage of the said terms would be considered without basis.

To examine the validity of newspaper representations of caste with this test, the researcher did a content analysis of a sample of recent stories, taken from two leading English newspapers, namely, *The Hindu* and *The Times of India*. Since the study is not primarily about the frequency of occurrence of either “lower caste” or “upper caste” but instead about the validity of the said terms when and where they occur, the search was restricted

to a one-month period from June 24, 2015 to July 24, 2015. The stories were selected from the Web editions of the two papers. The search resulted in 20 stories from *The Hindu* and 27 stories from *The Times of India*.

Guidelines for the content analysis of news stories:

- (i) In each story, words like “lower caste” and “upper caste” were identified.
- (ii) It was then determined as to whether the terms were attributed to a source or not. If it was explicitly or implicitly attributed to a source, it was considered to be used by ‘Source’. If not, it was considered to have been used by ‘Journalist’. For stories that are not news reports, e.g., columns, reviews or editorial page articles, writers are also considered to belong to the category of ‘Journalists’, and the same test was applied, namely, whether the term was attributed or not.
- (iii) Under qualitative aspects, the use of quotation marks or prefixes such as “so-called” was considered to be an acknowledgement of the contested nature of the terms.
- (iv) Finally, each instance of “upper caste” and “lower caste” was classified as either “inherent” to the construct of the story, or “not inherent”, depending upon whether the term was used by a ‘Source’ or a ‘Journalist’, respectively.

Table 1- Analysis of stories from *The Hindu*

Serial No.	Instance of ‘lower caste’ (LC) or ‘upper caste’ (UC)	Used by Journalist / Writer (J) or Source (S)	Qualitative aspects (presence or absence of quotes for the terms in question)	Whether ‘inherent’ (I) or ‘not inherent’ (NI)
<i>Story 1. Lalu, Nitish to be Hit Hardest if Caste Data Released: Paswan; July 23, 2015</i>				
1	UC	S	No quotes	I
2	LC	S	No quotes	I
3	LC	S	No quotes	I
4	UC	S	No quotes	I
5	UC	S	No quotes	I
6	UC	S	No quotes	I

<i>Story 2. A Meatless Argument; July 20, 2015</i>				
7	UC	S	In quotes	I
8	UC	S	No quotes	I
9	UC	S	No quotes	I
<i>Story 3. Dalit Farmer's Suicide Triggers Protest; July 20, 2015</i>				
10	UC	S	In quotes	I
<i>Story 4. Neerajghaywan on the Making of 'Masaan'; July 18, 2015</i>				
11	LC	J	No quotes	NI
12	UC	J	No quotes	NI
<i>Story 5. Upper Caste Men Can't Become Bihar CM: Union Minister; July 18, 2015</i>				
13	UC	S	No quotes	I
14	UC	S	No quotes	I
15	UC	S	No quotes	I
16	UC	J	No quotes	NI
17	UC	S	No quotes	I
18	UC	S	No quotes	I
19	UC	J	No quotes	NI
<i>Story 6. Memorial to be Built for Karamchedu Victims: Ravela; July 18, 2015</i>				
20	UC	J	In quotes	NI
<i>Story 7. Pond Water Here is Still 'Untouchable'; July 18, 2015</i>				
21	UC	J	In quotes	NI
22	UC	J	In quotes	NI
<i>Story 8. 'PMK Creating Division'; July 17, 2015</i>				
23	UC	S	No quotes	I
<i>Story 9. 'Let Dalits Have Arms'; July 16, 2015</i>				
24	UC	J	No quotes	NI
<i>Story 10. Lalu Leads March for Caste Census Data; July 14, 2015</i>				
25	UC	S	No quotes	I
<i>Story 11. Demonstration at St Michael's Cathedral; July 13, 2015</i>				
26	UC	J	No quotes	NI

Story 12. Key Witness in Caste Conflict Case Found Dead; July 12, 2015				
27	UC	J	In quotes	NI
Story 13. Caste Wars Ahead of Bihar Polls; July 12, 2015				
28	UC	S	No quotes	I
Story 14. A Memoir Set in Princely Mysore; July 9, 2015				
29	LC	S	No quotes	I
Story 15. Hindutva Forces Posing A Threat to Dravidian Movement: Vaiko; July 8, 2015				
30	UC	S	No quotes	I
Story 16. Special Legislation Needed: VCK; July 3, 2015				
31	UC	J	No quotes	NI
Story 17. Shahumaharaj's Welfare Acts Remembered; June 29, 2015				
32	LC	S	No quotes	I
Story 18. In Bollywood, Storylines Remain Backward on Caste; June 28, 2015				
33	UC	J	No quotes	NI
34	UC	J	No quotes	NI
35	UC	J	No quotes	NI
36	UC	J	No quotes	NI
Story 19. A Dream Realised; June 28, 2015				
37	LC	J	No quotes	NI
Story 20. Fiction Rooted in Facts; June 25, 2015				
38	UC	J	No quotes	NI

Table 2- *The Hindu* Story Analysis

	Usage of Caste Elements	Frequency
1.	Instances of “lower caste” (LC)	06
2.	Instances of LC with quotes or prefix indicating the contested nature of the term	00
3.	Instances of LC with no indication of the contested nature (No quotes or prefix)	06
4.	Instances of LC with Inherent (I):	04
5.	Instances of LC Not Inherent (NI)	02
6.	Instances of “upper caste” (UC)	32
7.	Instances of UC with quotes or prefix indicating the contested nature of the term	06
8.	Instances of UC with no indication of the contested nature (No quotes or prefix)	26
9.	Instances of usage with Inherent (I)	17
10.	Instances of usage Not Inherent (NI)	15

While a majority of the instances of LC and UC in this sample are “inherent to the story”, there is scope for improvement in terms of indicating the contested nature of the terms. Probably because of the political articulation of sensitivity to the use of the term “lower caste”, there were fewer problematic instances of its use (i.e., those lacking “inherent”) in *The Hindu* but they were not completely absent.

Table 3 - Analysis of Stories from *The Times of India*

Serial No.	Instance of ‘lower caste’ (LC) or ‘upper caste’ (UC)	Used by Journalist / Writer (J) or Source (S)	Qualitative aspects (presence or absence of quotes for the terms in question)	Whether ‘inherent’ (I) or ‘not inherent’ (NI)
<i>Story 1. Eyeing Dalit Votes, Shah to Visit Tamil Nadu on Aug 6; July 24, 2015</i>				
1	Dominant caste (=UC)	J	No quotes	NI
2	UC	J	In quotes	NI

Story 2. Both Lalu, Nitish are Venomous Snakes: Pappu; July 23, 2015				
3	UC	J	No quotes	NI
4	LC	S	No quotes	I
Story 3. Masaan – Movie Review; July 23, 2015				
5	LC	J	No quotes	NI
6	UC	J	No quotes	NI
7	Untouchable caste (=LC)	J	No quotes	NI
Story 4. Manjhi's Eid Politics Baffles Observers; July 20, 2015				
8	UC	J	No quotes	NI
9	UC	J	No quotes	NI
Story 5. Sunil Pandey Shifted to Beur Jail on DM Recommendation; July 20, 2015				
10	UC	S	No quotes	I
Story 6. New Bridge on Ganga Approved; July 19, 2015				
11	UC	S	No quotes	I
12	UC	S	No quotes	I
13	UC	S	No quotes	I
14	UC	J	No quotes	NI
Story 7. Caste Data to Hit Nitish, Lalu Hard, Says Paswan; July 19, 2015				
15	UC	S	No quotes	I
16	UC	S	No quotes	I
17	LC	S	No quotes	I
18	LC	S	No quotes	I
19	UC	S	No quotes	I
20	UC	S	No quotes	I
21	UC	S	No quotes	I
Story 8. Sumo: Lalu's Like 'Hanuman' Who Will Burn Own 'Lanka'; July 16, 2015				
22	UC	J	No quotes	NI
Story 9. Poem for Kids Out of Rhyme With Anti-Casteist Law; July 15, 2015				
23	UC	J	No quotes	NI

Story 10. Dalit Beaten for Walking on Land Owned by Upper Caste; July 15, 2015				
24	UC	J	No quotes	NI
Story 11. Groups Clash Over Draining Water From Flooded Colony; July 14, 2015				
25	LC	J	No quotes	NI
26	UC	J	No quotes	NI
27	UC	S	No quotes	I
28	LC	J	No quotes	NI
Story 12. Bright Poor Upper Caste Students to Get Help in Bihar; July 13, 2015				
29	UC	J	No quotes	NI
30	UC	J	No quotes	NI
31	UC	J	No quotes	NI
32	UC	J	No quotes	NI
33	UC	J	No quotes	NI
34	UC	J	No quotes	NI
35	UC	J	No quotes	NI
36	UC	S	No quotes	I
37	UC	S	No quotes	I
Story 13. After Lalu-Nitish, Cong Demands Release of Caste Data; July 13, 2015				
38	UC	S	No quotes	I
Story 14. Memorial of Utkal Mani Razed, Locals Infuriated; July 12, 2015				
39	LC	S	No quotes	I
Story 15. Narendra Modi Belonged to 'Upper Caste' Before April 2000, Claims Lalu; July 11, 2015				
40	UC	S	In quotes	I
41	UC	S	In quotes	I
42	UC	S	No quotes	I
Story 16. We Gave First OBC PM, Most OBC CMs: BJP; July 11, 2015				
43	UC	J	No quotes	NI
44	UC	S	No quotes	I

Story 17. HC Issues Notices to Govt to Curb Atrocities on Dalits; July 11, 2015				
45	UC	S	No quotes	I
Story 18. Dalit Woman Seeks Wages, Man Burns Her House Down; July 9, 2015				
46	UC	J	No quotes	NI
47	UC	S	No quotes	I
Story 19. Posters with Casteist Slurs Put Up at Residential Colony, DM Approached for Probe; July 5, 2015				
48	LC	J	In quotes	NI
Story 20. Dalits Decry Death of their Old Dance Forms; July 4, 2015				
49	LC	S	No quotes	I
Story 21. Saibaba Steps Out of Jail After 419 Days; July 4, 2015				
50	UC	S	No quotes	I
Story 22. 'Lease Holders' to be Land Owners Now; July 4, 2015				
51	UC	S	No quotes	I
Story 23. India's Push to Save its Cows Starves Bangladesh of Beef; July 3, 2015				
52	LC	J	No quotes	NI
Story 24. Mirchpur Dalits get CRPF Security for 2 More Months; July 2, 2015				
53	UC	J	No quotes	NI
54	UC	J	No quotes	NI
Story 25. Director Neerajghaywan: Had Inhibitions to Cast Vicky Kaushal in 'Masaan'; July 2, 2015				
55	LC	J	No quotes	NI
56	UC	J	No quotes	NI
Story 26. Manoj Bajpai, Rajkumarrao Were to be Part of "Masaan"; June 29, 2015				
57	LC	J	No quotes	NI
Story 27. 'Masaan' Trailer Reveals Dark Side of Indian Society; June 26, 2015				
58	LC	J	No quotes	NI

Table 4 -The Times of India Story Analysis

	Usage of Caste Elements	Frequency
1	Instances of “lower caste” (LC)	15
2	Instances of LC indicating the contested nature of the term	01
3	Instances of LC with no indication of the contested nature (No quotes or prefix)	14
4	Instances of LC with Inherent (I):	05
5	Instances of LC Not Inherent (NI)	10
6	Instances of “upper caste” (UC)	44
7	Instances of UC indicating the contested nature of the term	03
8	Instances of UC with no indication of the contested nature (No quotes or prefix)	41
9	Instances of UC with Inherent (I)	21
10	Instances of UC Not Inherent (NI)	23

The above analysis (Table 4) suggests that in the sample from *The Times of India*, a majority of the cases were problematic either because of a lack of “inherent” factor or for not indicating the contested nature of the terms. It may be inferred that there is acknowledgement at the editorial level of the contested nature of the terms as indicated by the usage with quotes, but it is not always manifest in the stories; and that the news sources are emerging as a major source of problematic usage. Also, one may observe that the occurrence of the term “upper caste” is more frequent than the term “lower caste” in the news stories in both *The Hindu* and the *Times of India* newspapers.

Indian newspapers can legitimately take credit for providing wide coverage to caste-related injustices in society. It would only serve the purpose of such coverage better if some care is taken with regard to the kind of language that is used. After all, as the theory of social construction of reality says, rather than there being an objective social reality, it is made and given meaning by human actors. Given the power of language in creating representations of reality and that of the media in shaping worldviews,

newspapers should strengthen the chances of unjust impositions being contested, resisted and eliminated at all levels.

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